

OBITUARY OF JOHN FORSYTH MEIGS, M.D.

BY WILLIAM PEPPER, M.D., LL.D.

(Read before the American Philosophical Society, Oct. 19, 1883.)

There are many men who, in their quiet, unobtrusive course, are of incalculable value to the community, and yet who leave but scant material for the biographer. The record of their life-work is to be sought in the cherished recollections of thousands who owe what they hold most precious to their skill, energy and devotion.

Nowhere are such men found so frequently as in the ranks of the medical profession. Battles which call for the display of varied knowledge, ready resources, quick resolution, and unflinching courage and self-reliance in the face of tremendous dangers and responsibilities—and for these in such large measure as would win the world's applause if shown on some conspicuous stage—are waged by the physician in many a silent and secluded chamber against disease and death. And the man who turns aside from all allurements of personal ease, and, seeking no notoriety or other reward for his labors, save the consciousness of duty done, and of good results wrought out of perilous conditions, wages ceaselessly such warfare year after year, must rank as truly great.

Eminently such an one was the subject of this memoir, which, as I well know would accord with his own wish, shall be plain and brief in statement. John

Forsyth Meigs was born in Philadelphia on October 4, 1818, and died there on December 16, 1882, at the age of 64 years. In an eloquent and instructive memoir of his eminent father, Charles D. Meigs, M.D., which he read in 1872, before the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, a full account is given of the staunch stock from which he was derived. Certainly no one who enjoyed familiar acquaintance with that remarkable man, the elder Dr. Meigs, as I myself did, though his junior by half a century, could doubt that there would be transmitted to his children unusual and notable traits of mind and character. Of these children it is not fitting that I should now allude to any but the immediate subject of this sketch.

After being educated at Dr. Crawford's well-known school, John Forsyth Meigs began the study of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, at the premature age of 16 years, and received his degree in 1838, when he was still under 20 years of age. He then served as Resident Physician in the Pennsylvania Hospital for eighteen months, and in April, 1840, he went abroad, remaining until August, 1841, a considerable portion of which time he spent in Paris enjoying the then unrivaled advantages of that city for students of medicine. Immediately after his return he began the practice of medicine in Philadelphia, and from that time until a few days before his death, he continued the practice of his profession with almost unequalled assiduity.

His chief public service was in connection with the Pennsylvania Hospital, which institution he served as Attending Physician from 1859 to 1881, when he resigned* and was succeeded by his son, Dr. Arthur V. Meigs. He was also Consulting Physician to the Women's Hospital, to the Blind Asylum, and to the Children's Hospital.

The services he rendered to the Pennsylvania Hospital were most devoted and loyal, as has been the case with so many of those connected, as managers or as members of the medical staff, with that venerable institution. For many years Dr. Meigs sacrificed a large part of whatever summer recreation he otherwise might have enjoyed, for the opportunity of devoting to the cases in his hospital ward more time daily

* Resolutions passed Nov. 28, 1881, by the Board of Managers of Pennsylvania Hospital upon the resignation of Dr. J. F. Meigs:

Dr. John F. Meigs having presented his resignation as one of the attending physicians of this hospital, which, at his request, has been accepted, it is therefore

Resolved, That this Board desire to record their grateful recognition and appreciation of the faithful and efficient work done by Dr. Meigs in the various positions in the medical department of this hospital, which he has filled for twenty-five years past, and which has added largely to the reputation our Institution now enjoys.

Resolved, That in addition to the faithful discharge of all his official duties, this Board recognizes the obligations of this hospital to Dr. Meigs for other ways in which he has testified his interest for the Institution,—notably in procuring for it pecuniary aid, and in the thorough manner in which he has completed the historical record of the hospital to the year 1876.

Resolved, That a copy of these resolutions be engrossed, signed, on behalf of the Board, by the President and Secretary, and sent to Dr. Meigs.

than would have been possible had he chosen a term of service during the months when his private practice was most pressing in its claims.

He was a model Hospital Physician. His manners to the poor sick seamstress or servant girl in his ward were as kind, courteous and attentive as though he were in the chamber of his wealthiest patient. The care given to the study of each case, though with no thought of preparation for publication, was most thorough and minute.

An insatiable reader of medical literature, he was ever acquainted with the latest views as to the nature and treatment of disease, and while his extensive opportunities of observation had rendered him conservative and critical of mere theory, he was always willing to recognize and profit by real advances in the healing art.

He employed a special assistant, whom he paid liberally, to make full records of every case under treatment in his wards, and I have had many opportunities of knowing that these records, embodying as they did his own accurate observations, and wise or ingenious suggestions, were admirable specimens of clinical work. But here, as in all his medical work, it was clear that his great and abiding interest was the welfare of his patients, and the actual relief of their sufferings.

During the entire period of his connection with the hospital, he took his full share of the public clinical teaching, which has been carried on there for 107

years. His lectures were unlike any others to which I have listened. With no pretence at oratorical effect, but with, on the other hand, the most perfectly natural and conversational style, there was such an air of candor and utter truthfulness, so much delicate and refined disclosure of his own nature and thoughts, upon many other subjects than the medical question immediately under discussion; such varied and rich illustration of the question from the stores of a curiously retentive memory, charged with all the details of thousands of instructive precedents; and, above all, such uniform advocacy of the purest and highest and most disinterested aspects of medical work, as combined to render these lectures strikingly suggestive and valuable. But in addition to this routine work, though done with such spirit and enthusiasm as showed that it was always fresh to him, there were occasionally important original investigations suggested by him and carried out with his assistance. The most extended and complete of these special studies was that upon "The Blood in Malarial Fever," which was based upon an unusual series of cases of severe malarial fever from Southern seaports admitted to the Pennsylvania Hospital in 1866. The results of this investigation were highly important, and established, certainly for the first time in this country, certain additional facts in regard to the nature and mode of action of this singular poison. It was characteristic of the liberality and courtesy with which Dr. Meigs invariably

treated his junior colleagues, that in publishing these results he insisted upon the names of his collaborators, who were then the resident physicians serving under him in the hospital, being associated in the authorship. How many times have I heard him, when about to leave the hospital, after several hours enthusiastic work in the wards, in the microscope room, or in the pathological laboratory, exclaim that if it was only possible he would prefer infinitely to spend his life in a hospital, devoting himself to original researches upon the nature and treatment of disease, to any other conceivable plan of existence. I have mentioned these details because they illustrate the character of the man, and indicate the value of his public services, and especially of his influence upon all those who were fortunate enough to be brought into close contact with him in the discharge of these duties. It is no small tribute to the genuineness and disinterestedness of a man's devotion to science that, year after year, when overburdened with lucrative professional work, he should forego pleasure and much needed rest to spend laborious hours in such eager study in hospital wards as would stamp with distinction a young and enthusiastic investigator.

I have incidentally alluded to some of Dr. Meigs' writings, but it may at once be stated that, although not a voluminous author, he possessed admirable literary qualities and a most attractive style. The fact that he never sought any chair in either of Philadelphia's great

medical schools, and that from an early age he was absorbed in the cares and fatigues of a large private practice, explain why he wrote no more and, why, with one notable exception, his writings were not of an elaborate character. He suffered also, as the sons of greatly distinguished men must do, from being viewed as an author in comparison with his gifted father, who was one of the most eloquent and facile writers ever produced by the medical profession of this country. But in fact the writings of Dr. John Forsyth Meigs stand successfully the strictest criticism. As an example of his style, and as proof that he possessed literary gifts which, if leisure had been afforded, or if his ambition had been in the direction of more frequent publication, would have won him high rank as a writer, I would refer again to the memoir of his father, which seems to me a charming piece of biographical writing, abounding in evidences of correct taste and of delicate delineation of character, and written throughout in a pleasing, vivacious and sustained style of narrative.

The following list comprises the more important of his shorter writings :

April, 1847. History of Seven Cases of Pseudo-membranous Laryngitis or True Croup; with Remarks on the treatment, and the distinction between it and other Laryngeal Affections of Children. Vol. 13, N. S. Amer. Jr. of Med. Sciences, page 277.

October, 1848. A Practical Treatise on Diseases of Children.

April, 1849. History of Five Cases of Pseudo-membranous Laryngitis or True Croup, in three of which Tracheotomy was performed. Vol. 17, N. S. Amer. Jr. of Med. Sciences, page 307.

November, 1850. Pneumonia in Children. Vol. 1, N. S. Trans. Coll. of Physicians and Surgeons, page 5.

June, 1852. Remarks on Atelectasis Pulmonum, or Imperfect Expansion of the Lungs, and Collapse of the Lungs in Children. Vol. 23, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Sciences, page 83.

October, 1856. History of Three Cases of Intermittent Fever, Showing the Natural Course of the Disease. Med. Examiner, page 56.

October, 1859. Remarks on Chronic Gastritis, Duodinitis and Colitis. Vol. 1, Proc. Path. Society, page 243.

September, 1860. Clinical Lecture on Diabetes Mellitus, delivered at Pennsylvania Hospital.

June, 1860. Remarks on Transposition of Arteries. Vol. 2, Proc. Path. Society, page 37.

January, 1861. Remarks upon Intestinal Concretions in the Appendix Cæci, causing Perforation and Fatal Peritonitis. Vol. 2, Proc. Path. Society, page 77.

April, 1864. Heart-clot as a Cause of Death in Diphtheria. Vol. 47, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Sciences, page 305.

October, 1865. On the Pathological Appearances presented in Marsh Fever. Vol. 50, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Sciences, page 305.

April, 1868. On the Morphological Changes of the Blood in Malarial Fever, with Remarks on Treatment. Vol. 55, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Sciences, page 475.

January, 1869. History of Two Cases of Embolism; in one following Scarlet Fever, with recovery; in the second, connected with Disease of the Aortic Valves and Coarctation of the Thoracic Aorta, ending fatally. Vol. 57, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Sciences, page 24.

January, 1869. Address on the Opening of the New Lecture and Operating Room of the Pennsylvania Hospital. Published September, 1871.

July, 1869. History of Two Cases of Cerebritis; one from unknown cause, the other traumatic, with recovery under active depletion. Vol. 58, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Sciences, page 146.

November, 1872. Memoir of Charles D. Meigs, M. D. Vol. 1, N. S. Trans. Coll. Phys. and Surg., page 417.

January, 1875. A Case of Pneumo-Hydropericarditis. Vol. 69, N. S. Amer. Jr. Med. Scs., page 81.

September, 1876. A History of the First Quarter of the Second Century of the Pennsylvania Hospital.

September, 1878. Atelectasis Pulmonum. Proc. Obstet. Society.

January, 1879. Cases of Collapse of the Lungs and Cyanosis in Young Children. Amer. Jr. Obstetrics, Vol. 1, page 79.

February, 1880. Lecture on Water.

1880. Annual Address before the Alumni Society of the University of Pennsylvania.

The work, however, by which Dr. Meigs will be longest and best known, is the treatise on "Diseases of Children," the first edition of which was published in 1848, and which immediately attained the position of a standard authority. A second and third edition appeared in rapid succession, and were quickly exhausted, after which, owing to his excessive occupation, it was allowed to become out of print. In 1869, he requested me to associate myself with him in the task of bringing the work up to date, and the fourth edition, which appeared in 1870, has been followed by three others, the last having been published in 1882. The estimation in which this has come to be held may be appreciated from the language of the London *Lancet*: "It is a work of more than 900 good American pages, and is more encyclopædial than clinical. But it is clinical, and withal most effectually brought up to the light, pathological and therapeutical, of the present day. The book is like so many other good American medical books which we have lately had occasion to notice; it marvelously combines a résumé of all the best European literature and practice, with evidence throughout of good personal judgment, knowledge and experience. There are few diseases of children which it does not treat of fully and wisely in the light of the latest physiological, pathological and therapeutical science."

But unquestionably, it is as the wise and trusted phy-

sician that Dr. Meigs will be most vividly and fondly remembered, so long, at least, as any of those survive who had the benefit of his ministrations and advice. I doubt whether there could be found, in any other large city, prominent physicians occupying precisely the relation to the community which has, for a hundred years past, been borne by a succession of eminent medical men in Philadelphia.

For the most part, as communities enlarge, the leading physicians are forced by the demands upon their time to assume more and more the role of consultants, and to abandon, in large measure, the more intimate and personal relations with their patients which ~~is~~^{are} occupied by the family physician. But in this city, despite its rapidly enlarging proportions and population, the case has always been different. There have ever been physicians in Philadelphia, whose important hospital positions, popular and authoritative writings, and eloquent teachings, have combined to render deservedly illustrious, but who have continued willing to devote themselves to the daily routine of family practice. It need not be indicated that such a course has displayed singular unselfishness; since such combined labors have involved almost superhuman exertions and application, while their personal services have been rendered for remuneration scarcely greater than that received by their less experienced and less eminent colleagues. But this self-sacrifice and devotion to the interests of their patients, has been repaid by a degree

of affectionate gratitude and loyal attachment on the part of the community, which has rendered almost unique the position of the leading medical men of Philadelphia. Of this long line of distinguished practitioners Dr. John Forsyth Meigs was an excellent example, and it is scarcely too much to say that, owing to a variety of causes which cannot be here discussed appropriately, he was the last of that line. Whether the people of Philadelphia will gain or lose more by the changes which, during the past decade, have rapidly come over the relations between the medical profession and the community, is an open question. But it is evident that such changes were unavoidable, and the only matter of surprise is, that they could have been postponed so long by the conservative spirit, so strongly prevalent here, and by the respect paid by the medical profession to its deeply rooted traditions. In this relation of trusted and confidential adviser, Dr. Meigs could not have been surpassed. Of spotless integrity and purity of character ; with a lofty conception of his duty as a physician, and with unselfish devotion to the pursuit of medical science ; with such courtesy and charm of manner and conversation as made him one of the most agreeable companions ; with infinite tact, patience, gentleness and sympathy with the sick and suffering ; and yet with firmness of will, vigorous energy, calm and dignified self-reliance which commanded implicit confidence and obedience in the hour of most urgent and deadly danger ; it is not easy to conceive or por-

tray the large and important place such a man filled in the lives and affections of hundreds or thousands who cherished him as their physician. I well know that this poor tribute would be re-echoed in stronger and warmer accents from many a sick chamber, which is to-day deprived of its brightest cheer and strongest comfort through his death.

But few details of his private life need be added to this sketch. He was married Oct. 17, 1844, to Miss Ann Wilcocks Ingersoll, daughter of the late Charles J. Ingersoll, Esq., and was so unfortunate as to lose this amiable woman by death on Dec. 30, 1856. He remained faithful to her memory and never married again. Eight children were born to him, of whom the eldest and the youngest died. His son, Dr. Arthur V. Meigs, after graduating at the University of Pennsylvania in 1871, has devoted himself with signal success to the profession followed by his distinguished father and grandfather, and already occupies the same important public positions in connection with the Pennsylvania and Children's Hospitals, which were formerly held by his father.

His habits of life were extremely simple and almost austere. He clung to the simplicity of his early days, and lamented the luxury of our own time. His constant and absorbing occupation, as well as his own tastes, prevented him from moving to any considerable extent in general society, or, during his later years, from even attending the meetings of the scientific or

medical societies to which he belonged. Although he worked incessantly and arduously, it is certain that his strength was never great nor his health robust. He had two serious illnesses, pleuro-pneumonia in December, 1854, and a second attack of pneumonia, complicated with hemorrhage from the lungs, in December, 1863. His last illness was also pleuro-pneumonia, which was contracted in December, 1882, by exposure during a professional visit, when he was reduced by a heavy cold; it ran a rapid course, and ended fatally on the eighth day.

